Freemasonry was first introduced almost 200 years ago to the town of Arklow, which is situated on the East coast, about 45 miles south of the city of Dublin and is one of the Major towns on the Dublin to Wexford primary road, the N 11.

Legend has it that the Irish tribe, who inhabited this region long ago called the early settlement at the mouth of the Avoca River Tulackinbhearmore. The Vikings who settled here were unable to pronounce the word and renamed it Arklow, allegedly after Aru-kell, the Viking Chieftain who settled there in the 9th century.

The surname Doyle, which is very common in this area, comes from Dubh-Gall, which means dark stranger or in other words the Norse invaders. Near the town is a road still known as the Danes road.

The town itself is steeped in history. The castle was built about the year 1250 and eventually became the seat of the Earl of Ormonde. In 1316, the town was burned by the O’Byrne’s and the O’Tooles, but they were defeated by Edward Le Butleir.

In 1649, Oliver Cromwell on his march south took the castle without bloodshed. That same year many fishing smacks were burnt by the Irish to prevent the British recapturing them. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the Butlers sold or leased the majority of their possessions to Ralph Howard, the first of his family to settle in Ireland and it was he who was founder of Shelton Abbey and
ancestor of the Earls of Wicklow. In 1690 King James II spent a night in Shelton on his way to Waterford, after the battle of the Boyne.

During the 1798 rebellion, Arklow was the scene of a fierce battle, which was probably to prove the turning point of the campaign.

By the end of the eighteenth century, Arklow had become a prominent seaport. In 1826l, the first Life Boat Station in Ireland at Arklow. In passing I might mention that in July of this year 1993, the station was visited by H.R.H. the Duke of Kent in his capacity as head of the Royal Lifeboat Association. He is, of course, also the Grand Master of the United Grand Lodge of England.

Even though in 1834 Arklow was described as one of the poorest villages that could be seen, it developed from being a small fishing centre, to being one of the most important maritime ports in the country. The success of the Avoca copper mines was one of the main factors in its growth. By the year, 1870 there were up to eighty vessels based in the harbour. Its fleets of sailing ships and schooners carried cargo from as far as the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. A successful oyster fishery operation also existed and at one time oysters were exchanged for coal in England.

Daniel O’Connell, The Liberator, and who was also a Freemason, addressed many meetings in the main street, which was then a market place for farmers.

One of the best-known shipyards was Tyrell’s, which built the famous Gypsy Moth III for Sir Francis Chichester in which he won two trans-Atlantic races. Tyrell’s also built Asgard II, a sail-training vessel for the Irish Naval Service.

The two world wars brought tragedy and prosperity. Between 1895 and 1919 the Knoochs explosive and munitions factory employed up to 4000 people. This era of prosperity was brought to a close when the factory caught fire due to a terrible explosion.
Other factories of note are the famous Arklow Pottery, which is a regular tourist venue, and also N.E.T., which produces artificial fertilisers.

In recent years, the town has become European in outlook. It is now twinned with the town of Chateau dun, France and many exchanges have taken place.

There has been a long history of military activity in the area and because of this, it is not surprising that it was through military involvement that brought freemasonry to Arklow.

Military involvement in Freemasonry in Ireland dates back to the late sixteen hundreds. The formation of the Irish Guards took place in 1661, when King Charles II commissioned the Duke of Ormonde and the Lord Lieutenant to raise the King’s Regiment of foot Guards for Ireland. It was quartered in Dublin at the expense of the local citizens and used St. Stephen’s Green as its parade ground. At that time Freemasonry was little more than a trade union of craftsmen, but it has been recorded that a Lodge of Freemasons was set up by some Officers of the King’s Regiment on March 25th 1688, which at that period was New Year’s day and was kept as a festival by the craftsmen. Eventually as time passed the members of the armed formed more Lodges, and it was largely due to their enthusiasm that greatly assisted in the spread of Irish Freemasonry to many parts of the world. In fact, the Grand Lodge of Ireland became the first Masonic body to issue Warrants to Military Lodges. It is directly from these episodes in history that Lodge 877 originated.

On the 2nd, Of January, 1800, the Grand Lodge of Ireland issued a Warrant bearing the number 877, giving permission to three members of the Wicklow Militia to hold a Lodge of Freemasons. At that time, the depot of the Regiment seems to have been in Wicklow, but two years later, they moved to Arklow where they continued to meet as a Military Lodge.

The Militias was disembodied in 1815, whereupon 877 became a civil
Lodge and has continued as such ever since. We are proud of the fact that we are the oldest Lodge in the Province of Wicklow and Wexford with a continuous working under the same Warrant. It is also the last of the old Military Warrants still bearing its original name.

It is interesting to note in passing that there was also another Lodge in Arklow. This was No. 879, which was warranted on the 6th February, 1800. It returned its warrant in 1822.

As the minutes books previous to the year 1857 are missing, little is known of the early days of 877. They obviously survived the difficulties in Grand Lodge during the early eighteen hundreds, because from 1823 to 1825 Freemasonry was suspended along with other so called Secret Societies until the authorities were persuaded otherwise. At that time the degrees of Royal Arch and Knight Templar appear to have been conferred at Craft level, as in 1854, a complaint was made to Grand Lodge that Lodge 877 were conferring these degrees at fees below the prescribed rate. In a letter to Grand Lodge, (which is still in existence) this charge was vehemently denied, by the Arklow Secretary W.Bro. Sam Whitmore. This seems to have satisfied Grand Lodge as they eventually replied accepting his explanation.

During these early years as the members of 877 did not have a home of their own, their monthly meetings were held in the Arklow Court House and they appear to have been welcome tenants.

From 1857, onwards a slightly clearer picture emerges, but as the minutes of the time are very concise and frequently almost illegible, the information available is not as detailed as one would have wished. The one fact, which clearly stands out, is that the Brethren of those days certainly took their Masonic duties seriously. This is underline by the Byelaws of 1858, some of which make interesting reading.

1. Any member who absents himself on the ordinary Lodge nights, if within three miles to be fined sixpence.
2. Every Officer absenting himself to be subject to double fines. (What a good idea?)

3. Any member disobeying the Master’s Mallet after the third stroke to be fined one shilling.

4. The books containing the Minutes of the Lodge must not be removed from the Lodge room. (Rather hard on the Secretary!)

5. An Oath, a Curse or obscene talk, declared punishable by the Master. The offending Member must stand up when called upon, and shall be fined three pence. The fine to be doubled on each repetition of the offense.

6. Any member coming into the Lodge drunk, or getting drunk therein shall be fined two shillings.

7. The Tyler is to get, each Festival Day, his dinner, and each Quarterly meeting his supper, to be exempt from dues and to receive half a crown for each night.

8. On the two Festival Days the expenses to be limited to five shillings each and every visiting Brother pays for himself.

9. Each member is expected to appear as clean as possible on Lodge nights, or be publicly reprimanded by the Master, for a second offense to be fined, and for a third not to be admitted. (I wonder does this law still apply?)

The Brethren’s interest in Ritual would also set an example to the Brethren of to-day as it was resolved in 1857, that the Opening and Closing as well as the different degrees be rehearsed and discussed at every meeting.

In that year the Secretary evidently got more than the customary vote of thanks for his services, as it was decided that he should receive
payment of three shillings per month, out of which he had to pay his Lodge dues of one shilling per month.

Things did not always run smoothly in 877 because at that time they had as Secretary a certain Bro. Leahy who tried to rule the Lodge with an iron hand, but he must have overstepped the mark because he was expelled in 1862 on charges proved against him prejudicial to Masonry. In addition, at that time, we come across the first recorded Black Bean, and there were several to follow.

However, the Lodge survived these difficulties and even prospered to the extent of conferring a first and three third degrees at an October meeting in 1871. Neither did they neglect their duties to the Charities, as it was agreed to send £2 annually to each of the Schools. It was also decided to relieve necessitous traveling Brethren (if found worthy) to the amount of 5/-.

With the large amount of business to be transacted, the Lodge was on occasion called off to refreshment and on again to labour.

St. John’s Day seems to have been the highlight of the Masonic Year and the members customarily travelled by carriage to dine together at Bro. Hunter’s Hotel, Woodenbridge, Bro Wynn’s Hotel in Rathdrum or Bro. Kidd’s Hotel in Gorey. Usual charge /-.

In 1887 the first mention of the British Royal Family is recorded as the Secretary was directed to forward an address to Her Most Gracious Majesty Queen Victoria congratulating her on having completed the 50th year of her “Glorious Reign.”

The authorities at Grand Lodge must have been quite alert in those days as in 1894 they sent a notice warning the Brethren of a professional tramp who was traveling about purporting to be a Mason. A notice was also received from Drum Lodge 184 appealing on behalf of Bro James Smith (Roman Catholic) who in consequence of his faithful adherence to the Order in the face of most determined opposition was on the eve of utter ruin unless assistance was immediately accorded to him. The Lodge voted to send the sum of £1
Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the Brethren of 877 felt an ever-increasing desire to build a Hall of their own. Partly because owing to changing conditions they were no longer welcome in the Court House. Many discussions and negotiations took place and various sites were examined. Finally, almost five years late in 1903 the present Hall was built. Lord Wicklow provided the ground for the new premises at a nominal rent of 10/- per year. The total cost of the new building amounted to £415 and the work was carried out by Bro. G. Kearon who was a local Contractor.

It must have been a very happy group of Brethren who attended the very first meeting in their new home. Unfortunately, there is no record in the minutes of this important and historic occasion.

It was first suggested to name the new Hall “Victoria”, but it was eventually decided to name it “Abercorn”, after the Grand master, The Duke of Abercorn. An invitation was sent inviting him to honour the Lodge by formally opening the hall. This must have been refused, and it was not until the 21st August, 1907 that the Hall was officially opened and dedicated by Rt.W. Bro. Fletcher Moore, the Prov. Grand master at the first Prov. Grand Lodge meeting held in Arklow. Prior to this meeting the Brethren had enjoyed a hearty luncheon consisting of six crammed fowl, a large ham, two large roasts of beef with tomatoes, mixed salad, hot potatoes, jellies and tarts together with a plentiful supply of beer. The total cost was £9.4.4. However, life at 877 was still not without its problems. The Black Bean had been made use of at several meetings and a report from the Committee of Inquiry had led to the withdrawal of the name of the Rector of Avoca previous to Ballot. This concerned the Brethren to such an extent, that they sought permission from Grand Lodge to change the rule to two Black beans, but Grand Lodge refused to grant it. Another problem arose when a young lady in the town was able to tell Bro. Myers all about the degree he had conferred on the previous evening. This led to the W.M. ordering all the Brethren to act as a Vigilance committee in future.
Life also had its lighter side. Concerts and dances were held on a regular basis. These apparently were quite lively affairs and a Vigilance committee was appointed to keep order among the children who attended, and to ensure that no member brought discredit to the Lodge.

In the year 1910, the Lodge was ordered by Grand Lodge to go into mourning for eight months following the death of King Edward VII who was the Grand Patron of Irish Freemasonry.

Life membership of the Lodge appears to have been available during the early years of this century at a charge of £5.0.0, provided that the Lodge felt the applicant would be a dedicated member. If Oscars had been awarded for dedication a certain Bro. E. Gregory would certainly have been nominated, as he attended the Lodge while still on his honeymoon and was heartily saluted by all the Brethren.

During the years prior to World War 1, the hall was used for many non-Masonic purposes. The Lodge room itself was let to the Presbyterians for their use on Sundays. This eventually came to the attention of grand lodge and they immediately ordered that this letting should cease and the Lodge room used for Masonic purposes only.

In the year 1916, the Hall was occupied during the summer months by the Sherwood Foresters owing to the Easter rebellion. During this time the Lodge collar jewels disappeared. The Major in charge, tried to trace them, but evidently without success as in the following year a new set was purchased at a cost of one guinea each. The Hall was also used by the Military for gymnastic exercises during the war period. Several members of the Lodge were involved in military action including W.Bro. Lord Wicklow. The Brethren also held dances to raise funds for “the Soldier’s Comforts”.

In 1919, we come across the first mention of income tax and the princely sum of 16/4 was paid to Collector General. The minutes of 1919, also record the first proposal to erect sanitary facilities and one
wonders how on earth they had managed previously. They certainly were in no hurry to install such an essential item, as it was not until five years late in 1924 that Lord Wicklow’s offer of five thousand bricks was accepted and a toilet was built at a cost of £48.15.0. I found no record of it being formally opened and one can only imagine the Brethren’s pride, not to say relief, when at long last it was completed.

The early nineteen twenties was a particularly flourishing period for 877 as they initiated a total to twenty six candidates during a three year period. This is rather surprising as at that time the initiation fee was six guineas, whereas the annual dues were only 5/- each. Quite a difference?

A very sad event took place in 1924. On the 7 August Bro. Romney Hughes was raised to the third degree. Unfortunately, however, he lost his life when journeying home on his motorcycle, as he collided with a car, which was without a light. Mrs. Hughes was later assisted by the Lodge and the Benevolent Institutions.

As is well known this was a difficult time for the country in general and there was a good deal of political unrest. Lodge 877 also had its difficulties, as in 1922 an attempt was made to burn the Hall, damaging it to a large extent. Subsequently a claim for malicious damage proved successful and the Lodge received a total of £57.15.0, in compensation.

In 1924 Lord Clonmore was initiated. He later became the Earl of Wicklow and also held the office of Prov. Grand Master of Wicklow and Wexford, as did his father before him. His grandfather was also a member of 877.

The next decade saw Lodge 877 approaching a period of even greater prosperity. In 1931, W.Bro. T.E. Earl affiliated from Harmony Lodge No. 228, Gorey. He proved to be one of the most loyal and dedicated members that this Lodge and indeed, the Masonic Order as a whole has ever seen, until his untimely death in 1956. He served
as Secretary for eighteen years, during which time he wrote a booklet entitled “A Brief History of Lodge 877”, which has been a valuable source of information in the writing of this paper.

With W.Bro. Earl as Secretary membership reached a total of 85 and the Lodge thrived as a result. Several teams demonstrated before the Grand Lodge of Instruction and a high standard of ritual was maintained. The Charities also featured prominently and many fund raising events were organized on their behalf. Masonic Church Services were held on a regular basis with congregations of almost 800. Whist drives were held annually and I can recall when I was eleven years old playing as a lady at one of these Whist Drives and actually winning first prize.

W.Bro. Earl is also remembered because in 1942 he presented a beautiful silver cup to the Province of Wicklow and Wexford. This is now known as the Earl Cup and is awarded each year to the Lodge in the Province with the highest per capita contributions to the benevolent institutions. Lodge 877 have won this competition on a large number of occasions. In 1990, it was won by Lodge XI Bray with an average of £102.59 and last year 1992, the average per capita of the whole Province was £32.50.

The Black Bean was now once again brought into use. According to the minutes of 1938, the Rector of Arklow was balloted for. This proved to be cloudy and he was declared rejected. The Secretary was most displeased; as he had been the proposer, an he gave the Brethren a long lecture as a result.

During World II, twenty-six members of the Lodge were involved in active service, three of these making the supreme sacrifice. In 1941, Bro. Reg S. Kearon was awarded the O.B.E. for bravery at sea. He later reported the loss of his M.M. Certificate when his ship was torpedoed. After his death, a handsome chair was presented in his memory by the members of a Dun Laoghaire Yacht Club.

An interesting card, which is still in existence, was received from a
member in 1944. It was written by Bro. J.C.O. Murphy from P.O.W. camp Stalag VIII Germany, and reads as follows- No correspondence has reached me from you this year, which may be due to my unexpected and I trust temporary change of address. Best wishes to all. The card is dated 12th June 1944 and bears the stamp of the German censor. Bro. Murphy was eventually released and returned safely home.

As the remaining ties with Britain had not as yet been broken it was decided in 1947 that the Secretary should convey to “Her Royal Highness Princess Elizabeth”, “Loyal greetings and good wishes”, on the occasion of her marriage to Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh. There is no record of an acknowledgement being received.

In 1949 the Brethren were upset when they received a letter from a Lodge in Reims, France stating that a man called Phildas Malcolm, who claimed to be a military correspondent, had obtained 3000 francs ad a valuable camera by saying that he was a Mason and a member of Lodge 877. It was a great relief to all the Brethren when the man was eventually proved to be a fake.

The 150th Anniversary of the Lodge was in 1950 and this was celebrated by a special meeting and dinner as well as several social events.

An unusual and rare situation occurred in 1958. A candidate for initiation was properly prepared and admitted to the Lodge room. However, after hearing the first of the questions put to him, he refused to answer in the affirmative. He decided that he did not wish to become a Freemason and retired from the Lodge room. However, he then had the audacity to stay for supper with the Brethren, enjoyed a hearty meal and was never seen again.

During the late sixties meetings were suspended on two occasions. Firstly as a result of the foot and mouth epidemic in England and later because of the disturbances in Northern Ireland.
The year 1968 was particularly memorable for me personally as it was the year of my initiation. I vividly remember my Entered Apprentice Degree, which was conferred by my father. Also in that year the Deputy Grand Master R.W.Bro. Jackie Wallace attended the August meeting and gave an interesting talk on Freemasonry in France. His ability as a speaker was well remembered by all who heard him.

The Secretary at this time was W.Bro. Edward Heavener, who had been elected as successor to W.Bro. Earl. He was to serve in this office for almost twenty years and it was during this period that the Lodge once again embarked on a programme of major renovations as it had fallen into a state of poor repair. A fund raising campaign was organized by the Brethren and permission was granted by Grand Lodge to issue and appeal. Finally, in 1975, the work was completed at a cost of £3758.50 some interior decoration was also carried out and I would draw attention to the wall emblems, which were made by the late R.W.Bro. Charles McConagh, a member of Lodge 877 and also the Prov. Grand Master of Wicklow and Wexford. Subsequently a social evening was held so that the ladies and other friends could view the improvements.

A meeting held in 1972 must of course be mentioned because on the 21st June R.W.Bro. W.J. O’Brien gave a most informative talk on the aims and activities of the Lodge of Research. Little did I realize then, that twenty-one years later I would find myself in similar situation.

Over the years the dining room has been used for many non-Masonic activities, some of which have been a useful source of income to the Lodge. For example since 1977, it has been used by the Arklow Country Markets for their weekly sale every Saturday morning. Its other uses have included committee meetings, bridge parties, a men’s reading room and, billiards.

The nineteen eighties saw efforts being made by Grand Lodge to open up the Masonic Order and promote a better image to the general public. The Brethren of Lodge 877 have endeavored to
support this idea and from time to time have made contributions to local Charities such as meals on Wheels and the Arklow Wheelchair Association. They also supported a young Arklow girl who had to have a very expensive liver transplant.

The Secretary at this stage was W.Bro. Brian Kearon. A name that has long associations with Lodge 877. It was largely through his efforts, despite falling numbers, that the many traditions of the Lodge have been maintained and even expanded. Inter Lodge visiting became a regular feature. Dinners were held for the Widows and Ladies nights were held annually.

1986 brought a brief hiccup to these activities as the dining room suffered a good deal of water damage due to the famous Hurricane Charlie. However, a number of Brethren arrived with mops and pails and soon order was restored.

At the August meeting of 1991 an event of some note took place when once again the name of Kearon came to the fore, and three generations were involved. Bro. Trevor Kearon was initiated. His father Brian, and grandfather William were both involved in the conferring of his degree. Now in the final decade of this century, the Brethren of Lodge 877 are looking forward to their Bi-Centennial Year. As the year 2000 approaches, they are endeavoring to maintain the standards, which were so well and truly set by the members of the Wicklow militia almost 200 years ago.

May the Lodge grow and prosper in the years that lie ahead. May the Brethren continue the work for our Order, and may their labours ever close in “Peace Love and Harmony.”

Brethren I thank you for your patient attention and if by chance you should ever find yourselves in Arklow on the third Wednesday of the month please do come and visit us as I can guarantee that you will receive a hearty welcome.